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ABSTRACT

Very little attribution research has examined subjects' self-attributions for important behaviors. When asked to identify reasons for committing criminal offenses, 60 institutionalized male delinquents cited primarily situational factors. This tendency to explain delinquent behavior appeared to be independent of chronological age, and indicative of an unwillingness to accept responsibility. Delinquents generally rated their reasons for criminal offenses more favorably than their perceptions of a judge's reaction to their reasons, a difference positively related to age and negatively related to number of reported offenses. Results suggest that this evaluation measure may be a useful indicator of socio-cognitive maturity. (Author/JAC)

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DELINQUENTS' ATTRIBUTIONS FOR THEIR OWN BEHAVIOR

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Introduction

Very little attribution research has examined subjects' self-attributions for important behaviors. Most studies have asked subjects to read stories and then give reasons for the described actions (e.g., McArthur, 1972) or to give attributions for their own behavior in an experimental situation, such as success or failure at an anagram task (e.g., Elig & Frieze, 1979). The absence of research on self-attributions for important behaviors is particularly true with regard to studies on criminal behavior. Although many studies have asked decision makers to make attributions about clients (e.g., Carroll, 1978), few have asked criminals themselves to give causal explanations for their own behavior. Thus, to a large extent the kinds of casual attributions that offenders give for their behavior is not known. With regard to delinquency, however, there have been some studies that have asked juvenile delinquents to explain their untoward behavior. For example, Sykes and Matza (1957) proposed a classification scheme of justifications for delinquents acts, which delinquents considered to be reasonable explanations for their deviance.

More recently, Wells (1980) asked institutionalized delinquents and public school students to give reasons why they and other adolescents engaged in eight delinquent behaviors. She then asked a different sample of delinquent and nondelinquent teenagers to rate the likelihood that each of the resulting 12 attributions would explain eight delinquent behaviors. Results showed that both groups of teenagers tended to attribute their own and others' behavior to situational rather than dispositional causes. Although both groups generally rated situational causes about equally likely explanations, the institutionalized sample used dispositional causes less frequently than did the noninstitutionalized group.

Unfortunately, Wells' study did not ask the teenagers to explain their nonnormative behavior in their own words. By asking subjects to rate the likelihood of the 12 previously generated explanations, she may have influenced subjects to use explanations which they may not have offered spontaneously. Thus, one purpose of this study was to look specifically at the nature and frequency of the attributions delinquents gave for their own behavior.

A second concern of the study was to learn how delinquents evaluated their explanations. Thus, they were asked to rate how good, both from their own standpoint and from the standpoint of a judge, their explanations were. It was expected that in most cases, delinquents would judge their reasons to be better than their perceptions of how a judge would rate the same reasons.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 60 institutionalized male delinquents who ranged in age from 9 to 16. The average age of the sample was 13.07. These 60 subjects were chosen at random from a larger population of approximately 100 boys housed in the institution.

Procedure

Subjects were asked to report the offenses that had led to their detention in the institution. They were then asked why they had done each act and to rate on 7-point scales how good they believed their reason to be, how good they thought a judge would believe it to be, and how serious they considered their act.

Results

Because 20 respondents (33%) gave only one offense as the reason for their institutionalization, only the first offense and the explanation and

ratings concerning it were used in subsequent analyses. The most common type of offense was properly related (55%), followed by person-related crimes (20%), juvenile status offenses (20%), and drug-related offenses (5%). Delinquents' explanations for their untoward behavior were coded into one of five categories: (a) internal (e.g., "for fun," "angry"); (b) external (e.g., "to get something," "friends told me to"); (c) both internal and external; (d) "don't know;" and (e) denial of the act. Three months after the initial coding, the coder recoded all of the attributions and placed 92% of them in the same category as in the previous coding.

External reasons were much more common than internal reasons. This finding was true for property, person, and juvenile status offenses, although it was not true for drug offenses. (See Table 1). Looking only at internal and external attributions, this tendency to give external reasons was unrelated to the age of the delinquent based on a median split on age, $\underline{X}^2(1) = .00$, n.s. (Yates' correction).

With regard to subjects' ratings of their explanations, generally delinquents did not consider their reason to be very good as they rated it below the midpoint of the scale ($\overline{X} = 3.39$). However, they did consider it to be better than how they perceived a judge would rate it ($\overline{X} = 2.08$), $\underline{t}\ (58) = 4.49$, $\underline{p} < .01$. The more serious subjects judged their offense, the less they believed a judge would find their reasons to be good, $\underline{r} = -.38$, $\underline{p} < .01$, although self-judged seriousness did not affect how they rated their own reasons, $\underline{r} = .15$, $\underline{p} > .10$. The difference between how subjects rated their reason and how they perceived a judge would rate their reason was positively related to age, $\underline{r} = .22$, $\underline{p} < .05$ and negatively related to number of offenses reported, $\underline{r} = -.35$, $\underline{p} < .01$. Older delinquents were more likely to rate their explanation higher than how they perceived a judge would rate their reason.

Delinquents who reported more offenses were less likely to rate their explanation higher than how they perceived a judge would rate their reason.

Discussion

Consistent with the original hypothesis and the study by Wells (1980), the delinquents in this study explained their offenses primarily in terms of situational factors. This tendency to explain delinquent behavior appeared to be independent of age. It may simply be that delinquents are reluctant to accept responsibility for their actions.

The fact that these delinquents generally thought their reasons were better than what they perceived a judge would think about them suggests that they were capable of taking the perspective of the other. The difference between the two was positively related to the delinquent's age and negatively related to the number of offenses he reported. These relationships suggest that this measure may be a useful indicator of socio-cognitive maturity.

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TABLE 1

CROSSTABULATION OF TYPE OF OFFENSE BY TYPE OF ATTRIBUTION

Type of Offense	Type of Attribution					
	Internal	External	Both	Don't Know	Denial	
Property	9	22	1	1	0	33
Person	2	8	0	0	2	12
Juvenile Status	1	6	2	2	0	11
Drug	3	0	0	0	0	3
	18	32	3	4	2	

$X^2(12) = 27.59$ $p<.01$